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Maureen Tolfree at UN Decol. Comittee

Mrs Maureen Tolfree

Petition to the UN Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples 13 July, 1994

Esteemed members of the UN Special Committee,

May I first of all thank you for allowing me to present a petition to this Session.

My name is Maureen Tolfree and I am from Bristol in England. I am the sister of Brian Peters, one of the five journalists murdered in Balibo, East Timor on 16 October 1975. Brian, who was four years younger than me, was the oldest of my three brothers. He went to Balibo on assignment as a cameraman for Channel 9 television, Sydney, Australia.

I have a personal interest in all this. I was not only his sister but almost his mother. Our mother left home when I was fifteen so it was left to me, with my father, to bring my brothers up.

My brother died a terrible death when he was trying to help the people of East Timor. I have come here to speak to you because I know that he would have wanted to call on this Committee to do everything for the East Timorese to be allowed to decide on their own future.

You will understand from what I have to say, why I never came to speak to you before.

When he was about 18, Brian emigrated to Australia. In September 1975 he wrote and told us he had had an incredible week in a place called East Timor. Though there had been some fighting between Fretilin and UDT, he and Gerald Stone, his news director from Channel 9, discovered that Fretilin was in control of most of Dili. When he left, he helped a group of 140 UDT refugees to go to Darwin. He also brought out an urgent appeal from the then president of Fretilin, Francisco Xavier do Amaral addressed to "the brotherly people of Australia" asking for help. He spoke of his people's "inalienable right" to "total and complete independence" and asked the Australian people to "give the Timorese people help in order to avoid any foreign intervention".

I have this photo of Brian's arrival back in Darwin.

Because he had done so well on his first assignment, he was asked by Channel 9 to go on a second assignment to East Timor. This was when he went to Balibo.

The first I heard of what had happened was when Brian's ex- girlfriend phone me on 18 October to say he had gone out with four other journalists and that four bodies had been found. She told me the fifth man had not been found, so we hoped that it might be him and he had gone into hiding.

But the next Monday, Gerald Stone phoned to say he feared all five journalists had been killed. He said we'd get a telegram, which we did. There seemed to be a lot of confusion, but we got no more news. I felt I had to do something so I went to Australia on 20 November 1975 to sort out Brian's effects. It was all very distressing.

Soon after I arrived in Australia, I had a phone call from Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock or perhaps it was an official from his department, saying how sorry he was about the death of my brother but "there was nothing I could do or say in the matter that would help in any way".

On my way back from Australia, because Qantas workers were on strike, I had to take a charter flight to Jakarta and pick up a Pan Am flight to England. Someone told me the remains of my brother would be taken to Jakarta so I thought I should try to stop by in Jakarta. I asked the air hostess to arrange this. She did and four men came to fetch me from the plane. I'm sure they were soldiers as they were in khaki and had guns in their holsters. They took me to a room and one of them stood guard at the door. About 15 minutes later, a phone rang and he indicated that I should pick it up. It was someone from the British or Australian embassy - I couldn't tell which - advising me that they couldn't guarantee my safety and urging me to get on my booked Pan Am flight. So that's what I did.

Back in Bristol, I got two letters from my MP, Tony Benn. The second one was all about the personal effects of the five missing journalists, and four boxes, containing the remains of four of the journalists. The letter said "the Australian embassy doctor confirmed that positive identification of the bodies was not possible". It also said "the authorities handed over documents and a camera said to have been found beside the body of a fifth European whose remains had been burned".

Later I read a Newsweek report of 10 November 1975 which said that one of the journalists "Malcolm Rennie, reported shortly before the battle that he had film of Indonesian warships and helicopters taking part in the fighting on Timor.... 'It's no secret that Indonesian troops are crossing the border,' said one Australian diplomat in Canberra last week. 'And the last thing they want is to have a foreign TV crew catch them red-handed.'"

The Newsweek report was illustrated by three photos. One was of the building used by the TV crews with "AUSTRALIA" in huge letters on the wall. Two smaller photos of Brian and Malcolm Rennie were captioned: "Strong suspicions of foul play."

Apart from a statement by an Australia official and an account of an investigation said to have been conducted into the five deaths suggesting that they had died in mortar fire, I heard nothing more.

I got some clippings but every time I looked at them, I got upset and so did my father. I couldn't risk upsetting him. He suffered three heart attacks between Brian's death and his own death in 1990 so I let things lie, meaning to do something, eventually.

Then some months ago, I heard about a radio programme when John Pilger spoke about East Timor. Then I heard of a demonstration about East Timor in Bristol in March this year. For the first time, I realised that many people in the UK were working for East Timor. Since then I have discovered many amazing things. I have heard that journalists tried to contact me and my father after Balibo but were told by the Foreign Office not to do so. I've also found out that the Foreign Office was informed about the deaths of the five journalists within 24 hours. They knew the details, knew that the Indonesians had killed those men, knew it officially from Australia's Defence Minister but hid the fact.

So, why am I here? What do I want? Many things. I want you to call for the people of East Timor to have an internationally-supervised referendum on their future. I also want governments, including my own, to stop lying about East Timor. I want to know why my brother and his colleagues are buried in Jakarta. I want their bodies to be re-buried in East Timor or Australia, as their surviving relatives want.

I want a properly conducted investigation into the deaths of the five journalists. But most of all, I want everything possible to be done for the people of East Timor. I'm a hundred per cent sure that that is what Brian would have wanted if he had not been murdered.

I'd like to close by showing this plaque which my brother was awarded posthumously by Thorn-EMI, for his coverage of East Timor.

Thank you very much.